

WHAT COYOTE AND THALES CAN TEACH US: AN OUTLINE OF AMERICAN INDIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

Brian Yazzie Burkhart

SOME INTRODUCTORY PRINCIPLES OF AMERICAN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Coyote is described as a philosopher in many American Indian stories. In part, this is because he wonders about things, about how they really work. Often in doing so, however, he forgets his place in the world; he does not remember how he is related. He reminds one of the stories of the beginnings of Western philosophy and the Greek thinker Thales. Plato tells us the story of "the Thracian maidservant who exercised her wit at the expense of Thales, when he was looking up to study the heavens and tumbled down a well. She scoffed at him for being so eager to know what was happening in the sky that he could not see what lay behind him and at his feet" (*Theaetetus* 174). One could quite easily replace the names in this story with Coyote and Rabbit, or Coyote and Skunk, or Coyote and Snake, and so on, and have any number of American Indian Coyote tales. Coyote, like Thales, is made fun of for his actions, actions that arise from his dislocation *vis-à-vis* the world around him.

Now, despite being objects of ridicule, Coyote and Thales seem to provide a starting point for our investigation of American Indian philosophy. But they do so by exemplifying what it is not. Plato uses the story of Thales to make clear what philosophy *is*. He explains that "[the philosopher] is unaware what his next-door neighbor is doing, hardly knows, indeed, whether the creature is a man at all; he spends all his pains on the question, what man is, and what powers and properties distinguish such a nature

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from any other" (*Theaetetus* 174). The stories of Coyote, conversely, are meant to show Coyote's mistakes. Like Thales, Coyote has forgotten the simple things. He has forgotten his relations. He has forgotten what is behind him and at his feet. When Coyote behaves in this way, he always finds trouble. He is mocked in these stories because he is behaving in the wrong way. The stories are meant to show us how not to act; they show us what philosophy is not, and not, as in the case of Plato and Thales, what it is and ought to be. This is one of Coyote's stories told to me as a child:

Coyote is wandering around in his usual way when he comes upon a prairie dog town. The prairie dogs laugh and curse at him. Coyote gets angry and wants revenge. The sun is high in the sky. Coyote decides that he wants clouds to come. He is starting to hate the prairie dogs and so thinks about rain. Just then a cloud appears.

Coyote says, "I wish it would rain on me." And that is what happened.

Coyote says, "I wish there were rain at my feet." And that is what happened.

"I want the rain up to my knees," Coyote says. And that is what happened.

"I want the rain up to my waist," he then says. And that is what happened.

The water continues to rise higher and higher as Coyote thinks and speaks about it. Before long, the whole land is flooded. In this story, we are supposed to learn from Coyote's mistake, which is not letting what is right (the right way to act regarding his relatives the prairie dogs, and so forth) guide his actions, but rather acting solely on the basis of his own wants and desires. We are supposed to see also from this story that we must be careful what we do, what we want, and what we think and speak, in general. We must never forget the things around us and how we are related to those things. We can refer to this last point as the principle of relatedness. The idea here is simply that the most important things to keep in mind are the simple things that are directly around us in our experience and the things to which we are most directly related. (In calling these ideas principles, I do not mean to give them special philosophical status. In American Indian thought, they are simply ways of being. These principles are merely abstractions from these ways of being. We shall soon see that principles in the traditional philosophical sense have no place in American Indian philosophy.)

Coyote also shows us that the questions we choose to ask are more important than any truths we might hope to discover in asking such questions, since how we act impacts the way the world is, the way in which a question will get answered. The way in which we ask questions (the way in which we act toward our relations) guides us, then, to the right answers, rather than the other way around wherein what is true directs the method of questioning and the question itself (i.e., we can ask any question we desire and in any way we desire, and the answer will remain the same). We can refer to this as the limits of questioning principle. Part of what underlies this principle, besides, clearly, the principle of relatedness, is the idea that how we act is not merely a result of causal interactions with the world. How we act is not merely a response to stimuli. The world is not empty and meaningless, bearing only truth and cold facts. We participate in the meaning-making of the world. There is no world, no truth, without meaning and value, and meaning and value arise in the intersection between us and all that is around

us. How we behave, then, in a certain sense shapes meaning, gives shape to the world. In this way, what we do, how we act, is as important as any truth and any fact. We can think of this as the meaning-shaping principle of action.

American Indians refer to this principle over and over again when asked certain questions by non-Natives. When asked such questions, Native elders will respond by saying, "We don't talk about those things," or "It is bad to talk about those things." These interdictions generally leave the questioner puzzled. But the confusion seems to arise from a lack of understanding regarding the underlying philosophical assumptions involved. With the aim of making clear these assumptions, here is a list of the principles addressed so far: first, we have the principle of relatedness and, second, that of the limits of questioning. We also have the meaning-shaping principle of action. But there is at least one other principle involved in this interdiction as these three principles are supported by a fourth that we might call "the moral universe principle." The idea is simply that the universe is moral. Facts, truth, meaning, even our existence are normative. In this way, there is no difference between what is true and what is right. On this account, then, all investigation is moral investigation. The guiding question for the entire philosophical enterprise is, then: what is the right road for humans to walk?

Now, this general shape we have given to American Indian philosophy is hardly adequate, at least as it stands. First, we have by no means gotten to the most basic principles. We have only begun to scratch the surface of what are the real underlying philosophical issues. Second, the surface principles are themselves still unclear. The second principle seems to imply that more knowledge is not always better since it seems to say that there are things we cannot or should not know. But how can there be such things? What sort of view of knowledge is at work in such a prohibition? It makes us wonder how such a thing could ever count as a view of knowledge in the first place. Furthermore, we are left wondering how such a view of knowledge would relate to the notion that right action determines truth, and not vice versa. And if acting in a certain way leads to the wrong path, creates the wrong truth, how do we *know* when a way of acting will lead to the right path or even which is the right path? The point is that once we push these philosophical principles far enough we are faced most directly with the question: "What is knowledge, and how could we possibly have it given these principles?"

American Indian philosophy, as we have begun to see and will continue to see, is quite concerned with the questions asked. American Indian philosophy has a very different relationship to questions and question-formation than does its Western counterpart. It is generally thought by Native philosophers that questions are most often a sign of confusion and misunderstanding. The answer to a question often lies in the question itself rather than in some solution outside of the question. The problem a question addresses is typically one that is raised by the very question itself rather than some actual state of affairs. And yet, given what we have described above, nearly any Western philosopher will ask at least the following two questions: "How do you know which is right in the first place?" and "How can less knowledge be better?" This second question is partly a result of Western philosophy's incapacity to grasp the idea that certain things *should* not be known, and the first arises from Western philosophy's

so-called battle with skepticism. From the perspective of Western philosophy, it is generally thought that more knowledge is always better. (By Western philosophy here I merely mean mainstream Western philosophy, the tradition that led from Thales to modern Anglo-American analytic philosophy: the kind of philosophy that is usually called merely "philosophy," with no adjective. The point of this distinction is simply that there are a number of fringe-dwelling philosophers, never quite accepted by the mainstream, who should not be saddled with the previous charge.) Of course, Western philosophy has always had skeptics in one form or another who claim that certain things cannot be known, but there seems to be no way for a Western philosopher in this mainstream tradition to claim that things we *can* know we *should* not know. Even those who claim that there are things that we cannot know do not typically see this as positive. We must settle, they want to say, for this limited knowledge. But by saying this, they implicitly suppose that we ought to have more and thereby disallow the notion that there is some knowledge we *should* not have. Even the knowledge we cannot have, we ought to. Given this implicit supposition, it seems impossible to claim that knowledge we can have we ought not to. But in American Indian thought, and for that matter in many non-Western systems of thought, such an idea is not problematic. In these ways of thought, the assumption is not already in place that more knowledge is always better or that we ought always to have more of it. From the American Indian perspective, our knowledge is not limited since we have as much as we should.

In what follows, then, we will concern ourselves with making clear this notion of knowledge and how it relates to an understanding of the principles of American Indian philosophy. In doing so, Coyote and Thales will continue to be our tricksters, leading us by example from their mistakes to a right understanding of American Indian philosophy. However, we must note that an adequate understanding of the principles given so far further requires a detailed analysis of what might be called American Indian moral-metaphysics. Here we would examine the way in which we can understand the claim that the universe is itself moral and how we can understand relatedness as a moral concept. However, in this piece we will concern ourselves only with understanding the given principles via Native epistemology.

THE TRADITIONAL WESTERN APPROACH TO EPISTEMOLOGY

The Western form of knowledge is expressed in a formula. The one most used is: knowledge = justified, true belief. If knowledge amounts simply to this, then it becomes clear why it is impossible to claim that less knowledge is better. Why would anyone find it necessary to have less true and justified beliefs? However, in order to discover how this might be the case, we must go back further into the methodology that gives rise to the justified-true-belief formula of knowledge. The formula "knowledge = justified, true belief" does not by itself necessarily conflict with Native philosophy, other than perhaps the peculiarities of being a formula and what comes along with that. The conflict arises at a deeper level in what, ultimately, we want this to mean.

In Western philosophy we call the study of knowledge "epistemology," which derives from the Greek *episteme*, knowledge, and *logos*, reason or account. This account purports to lay out the defining features of knowledge, the substantive conditions of knowledge, as well as the limits of knowledge. In large part, it is in these areas alone that the Western philosophical debate regarding knowledge arises: the analysis of knowledge, the source of knowledge (rationalism or empiricism), and the viability of skepticism. In this way, many issues regarding knowledge are generally left unquestioned. One such modern issue is the primacy of propositional knowledge.

Propositional knowledge is knowledge of the form "that something is so." It is the kind of knowledge that can be written down, that can be directly conveyed through statements or propositions. This kind of knowledge is thought to have permanence. If we make true and justified claims that something is so, those claims will continue to be true for eternity. In Western thought, this kind of knowledge is generally thought to be the pinnacle of philosophy.

Unlike in many non-Western schools of thought, in popular modern Anglo-American philosophy (which, as we have said, is for the most part what we mean by Western philosophy in this chapter), the idea that non-propositional knowledge is the more important, more basic, more fundamental form of knowledge has never been given much serious thought. There are those who in fact claim that all knowledge reduces to propositional knowledge. Here is the small and most likely inadequate list that philosophers in this tradition, who do not claim that all knowledge reduces to propositional knowledge, recognize as non-propositional knowledge: knowledge by direct awareness or acquaintance, and how-to knowledge or knowledge of how to do something. There may be still other forms or variations that have been overlooked in the monolithic focus on propositional knowledge. Whether or not this is so, it is clear that in Western philosophy, non-propositional knowledge, if it is accepted at all, plays little to no part in the work of philosophy.

Another aspect of traditional epistemology that has only recently become much of an issue arises from one of the three components of the traditional account of knowledge, and this is justification. It has seemed clear until quite recently to most epistemologists, with few exceptions, that justification requires foundations. To say this and then, by extension, that knowledge requires foundations is to say that justification requires: (1) that at least some beliefs be not only justified non-inferentially, that is, that they be justified not on the basis of other beliefs, but also (2) that they provide justification for those beliefs that cannot be justified non-inferentially, that is, those beliefs that without the beliefs in question would only be justified on the basis of other beliefs. Unless the first condition is met, there is no justification and no knowledge. If only the first condition is met and not the second, then our knowledge is very limited, limited to that of our own psychological states, for example. Part of the idea here is that for any belief x to count as knowledge, it must be justified. If it is justified by another belief y , then, in order for x to be justified, y must also be justified. We can quickly see that without something to stop this cycle, we will go on justifying infinitely. The foundationalist claim is, then, that for there to be knowledge there must be a z or set of z 's that is not justified by any other x and provides justification for y . Thus, in order for any

piece of so-called knowledge to really be such, this knowledge must rest on a foundation, something which, in a certain sense, does not rest on anything else.

THE AMERICAN INDIAN APPROACH TO EPISTEMOLOGY

American Indians have encountered the kind of reasoning used in this argument many times before. One such example is the routine response that Western people have given to a certain Native account of creation. In this account, the earth rests on the back of a turtle. The Western response to this account is simply the question, "What holds the turtle?" One elder storyteller responded to this question by saying simply, "Well, then there must be turtles all the way down." The storyteller had no patience with this way of thinking. It seemed to her that asking such a question was like asking for proof that she had a mother or for proof that plants grow in the earth and nourish the people – questions, in her mind, that only someone extremely confused would ask.

Part of the problem with such a question in this context is that it presupposes a certain amount of knowledge. By asking what holds the turtle up, the inquisitor assumes that such a question should be answered in order to justify the initial claim. This then assumes something like the notions of knowledge and justification detailed above, where for any belief to count as knowledge, it must be justified by another belief or be self-justifying. Any belief, then, on this picture must be justified by another belief or be itself a foundational belief, not requiring justification as it is incapable of being false, or whatever. Now, there are many different ways in which this gets fleshed out in modern epistemology, but the general requirement of justification remains the same. This is because the traditional view of justification is that justification is simply evidence.

But, while something like this picture of justification seems intuitive to the Western philosopher, American Indian thinkers will find it counterintuitive. This is because, for American Indian philosophy, knowledge is quite a different thing from what we have been describing. For American Indians, knowledge is knowledge in experience, or if knowledge does not simply amount to this, it is at least the most important knowledge. This is in complete contrast to the Western picture given above, wherein knowledge is propositional, or if knowledge does not simply amount to this, it is at least the most important knowledge. In contrast to propositional knowledge, which seems to be designed to outlast us, to take on a life of its own, to be something eternal, knowledge in experience is the kind of knowledge we carry with us. This is the kind of knowledge that allows us to function in the world, to carry on our daily tasks, to live our lives. This knowledge is embodied knowledge. We might do best to call this knowledge "lived knowledge." Whatever we call it, this kind of knowledge is not improved by adding abstract propositional form and is not capable of being justified in the foundational sense and seems to need no such justification.

In order to get clear about the nature of such knowledge, let us look at a rather simple example. Suppose a person learned to play a song on a musical instrument without the ability to read music. She practiced the song many times after hearing it played by


someone else until she reached the point where she could play it herself. She plays the song perfectly but could not say the first thing about the notes, the key, the time signature, and many other propositions regarding the song itself. If her desire were to play the song, then these abstract propositions would only get in the way since as far as playing the song is concerned her knowledge is complete. For American Indian philosophy, knowledge is just like this: it is gained from experience and used in it.

This lived knowledge can be likened to what in Buddhist philosophy is called *prajñā*. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, *prajñā* is the perfection of wisdom. It is called the heart of wisdom. It is the wisdom in *bodhiprajñā*, the wisdom of enlightenment. But this wisdom cannot be directly spoken or written down. It is a wisdom that is carried in one's heart. It is a wisdom that is held in experience. It is a know-how, but, as such, is fragile and non-eternal. It must be kept, as it can be lost if it is not held on to. One foolish notion is enough to shut off *prajñā*. This is clearly also an example of lived knowledge. But lived knowledge need not take on any mystical properties, for as we have seen, it can have great spiritual content (enlightenment) or simple content (the playing of a song). In either case, the knowledge as lived remains the same. It is only in what such knowledge concerns that we find difference.

Now, in Western philosophy, it is generally thought that truth and knowledge are not conducive to our ends, but rather are ends in themselves. Truth and knowledge are capable of guiding and shaping our action rather than being guided and shaped by it. But for American Indian thought this is clearly not the case. Knowledge is not a thing in the world that we can discover. Knowledge is not such that if we just peer into the world long enough or just sit and think long enough, it will come to us in all of its unabated glory. Knowledge is shaped and guided by human actions, endeavors, desires, and goals. Knowledge is what we put to use. Knowledge can never be divorced from human action and experience. Thus, just because we can imagine something that we would like to know, or can formulate a question regarding, this does not mean that there is, in fact, something to know or that we have formulated an actual question. There is no imagining possible things that might be known. There is only what we actually need to know, and this is a function of our practical lives. A question is, then, real just in case it arises in relation to something directly at hand, some practical concern. It is a question that comes to us and not a question that we formulate. Knowledge is then always concerned first and foremost with what is in front of us and at our feet. Unlike Thales and Plato, American Indian philosophers see the act of displacing oneself from the world in order to do philosophy not only as unnecessary but as highly problematic, since in doing so one is only guessing whether what one is striving after is really knowledge at all and whether the questions one has formulated are even really questions.

Now, let us look at a piece of embodied and practical American Indian knowledge in context. Centuries ago, the Senecas acquired a piece of knowledge. Three sisters, corn, beans, and squash, came to them. These three sisters told them that they wished to establish relations with people. The sisters gave the people certain ceremonies and told them that if they carried out these ceremonies (that supported the continued existence of the three sisters) the sisters would become plants and feed the people. Part of this

requirement was that the sisters be planted and harvested together. Clearly, this relationship between the sisters and humans, and between the sisters themselves, has spiritual and philosophical significance, but for our purpose we must point out this relationship also served as an extraordinary natural cycle of nitrogen replenishment. This cycle kept the soil productive and fertile and kept the Senecas fed for centuries. European colonists came along and planted only one crop at a time in one place, corn or wheat, and the soil suffered. Many scientific experiments later, scientists discovered that this suffering was from an imbalance of nitrogen and, in effect, acquired "knowledge" (in the propositional sense) of the nitrogen cycle. Scientists create chemicals to replace the natural nitrogen. However, experiments now show that not only do such chemicals have negative effects on the soil, but also negative effects on humans (Deloria 1999: 3-16).

We can see quite clearly how this knowledge is both practical and lived, but it is still unclear how it is achieved. How did the Senecas come to this knowledge? We have already detailed a portion of our answer above. This knowledge was gained by experience. The Senecas lived with the earth and its capacity to grow food. They listened to and observed the earth in the same manner as one would listen to ng in order to learn it, as in the example above. They did not attempt to formulate abstract truths about the earth's plant-growing capacities and how best to meet the needs of the people and at the same time live in harmony with the earth. The Senecas did not formulate questions to test the earth, to see if it conformed best to this pattern or that. To do so is to not really observe, to not really listen. It is to skip the end of the process of knowledge without taking the necessary steps to achieve this end. And yet nearly all of Western philosophy and science depend on this question-asking and test-construction method. In this regard, then, American Indian philosophy seems more philosophical and less dogmatic than much of Western philosophy and science.

The knowledge the Senecas acquired was lived knowledge that came from what was directly around them and at their feet. The knowledge concerned how the people should best live. It was not based on question-formulation or hypothesis-testing, but rather on patient observation and contemplation. And yet this was not the knowledge of the nitrogen cycle but the knowledge of the ceremonies and the three sisters. If the knowledge the Senecas gained was knowledge in experience, why was it conveyed in story and passed down in that form? Here we come to another aspect of Native philosophy that differs greatly from that in the West. Literature and philosophy, science and religion are all very different branches of knowledge in Western thought. Out of these four, most consider only two, science and philosophy, to be branches of knowledge at all. The other two are thought to be entirely different ways in which humans express their being in the world. However, in American Indian thought this is not the case. None of these four can really be separated from the others. The lack of a distinction here is due, in part, to the fact that knowledge is lived. If we think of knowledge in this way, we have no reason to suppose that any of these four carve up the world in different ways, are different takes on the world. For example, literature expresses our emotional involvement with the world, religion our faith, and philosophy and science alone give us the world as it truly is, objectively. If knowledge

comes from and is carried on only in experience, then there are no grounds for such a distinction.

As we have seen, American Indian philosophy is concerned with the right road for humans to walk in relation to all that is around them. We have also seen that what is right is true and what is true is right: the universe is moral. It is in this way that stories, ceremonies, and prayers speak the truth. All aspects of human expression have something to tell us about the best way for us to live. In this way, they are all philosophy. And just as American Indian medicine is best described in Western terms as magic, philosophy is, perhaps, best described as poetry. The knowledge of the earth and her capacity to grow plants and nourish humans takes the form of the story of the three sisters. This story is an expression of the knowledge of the earth that was acquired through many years of observation, much like a poem can be an expression of one's experience of a particular landscape. Because philosophy, literature, science, and religion are one in American Indian thought, we cannot truly separate the medicine from the magic nor the philosophy from the poem.

At this point, it may seem that Native knowledge is only concerned with individual, particular experience: my particular experience of a relationship with the land, my particular experience of a landscape that I express in a poem, or my particular experience of a song that I am trying to learn. It may seem that we are trying to claim that for American Indian thought there is no general knowledge. Everything is singular and held in particular experience. However, to make this move would be hasty for there are many levels of knowledge in American Indian thought. The Navajo, for example, hold that there are 12 levels of knowledge, and would say that in Western thought we work on the lower levels most of the time. There are clearly more general levels of knowledge at work even in the knowledge gained and passed on by the Senecas regarding the three sisters. But this knowledge is itself still of a practical and lived nature and it, too, is acquired through patient observation and contemplation and not by question-formulation and hypothesis-testing. This more general knowledge might be called synthesis, incorporation, or understanding. These words fit the different variations of the same general method. At the heart of any of them is a sort of grasping of general knowledge via a sort of phenomenological method.

AMERICAN INDIAN EPISTEMOLOGY AS A PHENOMENOLOGY

American Indian philosophy finds a camaraderie with the tradition of phenomenology. Phenomenology might stand beside us in some of what we have said earlier about Western philosophy and science since phenomenology has most forcefully questioned the modern philosophical assumption of a single, wholly determinable, objective reality. Edmund Husserl, one of the founders of phenomenology, makes the claim that the accomplishments of science presuppose the pre-given world of life, the everyday world. Husserl claims, however, that almost from the beginning Western philosophy lost sight of just who we are with this pre-given world. Greek science and philosophy "saw fit to

recast the idea of 'knowledge' and 'truth' in natural existence and to ascribe to the newly formed idea of 'objective truth' a higher dignity, that of a norm for all knowledge. From this arises the idea of a universal science encompassing all possible knowledge in its infinity" (Husserl 1970: 121). This becomes the foundational assumption of modern philosophy. Centuries later, Galileo asserts that only the properties of matter that are mathematically measurable, that is, size, shape, etc., are real. He claims that subjective aspects, i.e. sound, taste, and so forth, are illusory. The world can only be understood, given this, through the language of mathematics. After Descartes publishes the *Meditations* in 1641 the world becomes understood as entirely mechanical, as an entirely determinate structure governed by laws which are understandable only through mathematical analysis. This finally lays the ground for the idea of an entirely objective knowledge and an entirely objective science.

According to Husserl, however, all science and knowledge come first from the lifeworld and must always return to it. The data of science come from this world of life, and when the science is finished and the results are compiled they are also displayed in the open and uncertain domain of everyday life. The lifeworld is the ground of science, the ground of knowledge, for Husserl, and the crisis that he speaks of in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* is that European science and philosophy have not acknowledged this ground. But this crisis in modern science is also a crisis of culture as it has facilitated the loss of this world for Western society.

In many ways, this very crisis that Husserl describes also facilitates a loss of American Indian philosophy. Much of this philosophy since contact has concerned itself with the possibility of a total loss of the lifeworld. However, beyond these similarities in results, there is a more important similarity in method. Phenomenology begins with a distinction between two different attitudes: the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude. The natural attitude is the way we are ordinarily taken up with the various things in the world. We walk down the streets and pass the trees. We have conversations with our friends and talk about our jobs. What we do not do in this attitude is step back and reflect on this natural way we carry on in the world. We are, after all, taken up with our daily concerns. We have things to do and we cannot do these things if we are disengaged from this natural attitude. However, the phenomenological attitude is just this kind of disengagement. One disengages from the natural attitude and focuses instead on all that is in the natural attitude in order to reflect upon it. In this reflection all of our experiences in the natural attitude count as data to be understood. All of the phenomena must be accounted for. We then, from this reflective perspective, describe all the particular intentionalities (the ways in which we are directed to the world) of the natural attitude in order to understand the world and our place in it.

Now, from this simplified account of phenomenology, we can see a number of commonalities with what we have been given so far in American Indian philosophy. As we have seen, American Indian philosophy is quite concerned with retaining the natural attitude. This is why the Coyote stories are told and why Thales can be seen as a Coyote-like character. And yet at the same time an immediate difference is apparent. Forgetting what one is doing because one is taken up with reflection and then falling down a well sounds very much like what could happen while engaged in the phenom-

enological attitude. In American Indian philosophy, there is no phenomenological attitude as such. In American Indian philosophy we must *maintain* our connectedness, we must maintain our relations, and never abandon them in search of understanding, but rather find understanding *through* them.

American Indian philosophy also has a very different view on what is to count as data and what is to be done with such data. When it comes to generalities, American Indian philosophy seeks synthesis or understanding, a way of seeing the whole. Given all the observations in our experience, we *begin* to formulate a general picture. A more general knowledge *begins* to take shape through the incorporation of all the data. This means accounting for all the data even if doing so makes understanding difficult, even if there are contradictions, even if the data are messy. In Native philosophy and science, however, there are no real anomalies or contradictions (Waters 2000). Through synthesis, we only begin to paint a general picture. Anomalies are only really possible once we have finished the picture and claim that this picture represents something about the world, that is, that it gives us a general picture of the world. For Native philosophers, this would be to stop doing philosophy, to stop observing, and to make some arbitrary claim that there will be nothing else to observe. It might be said that Native philosophy is a thinking philosophy. It is a philosophy where the thinking and the observing never stop, even to formulate theories, or questions. If we never stop thinking and observing, then there will always be room for new experiences. No matter how strange these experiences may seem, they will never be contradictory since there is nothing for them to contradict; they will never be anomalous since there is no theory for them not to fit into. This process of general synthesis is just that, a process, but it is one that is never finished. In order to complete the process, we would have to stop having experiences, for anything short of that would mean ending the process before it was complete. Thus, the process is always ongoing. We must continue thinking and observing and in that way leave ourselves open to continued experience and not shut ourselves off from it in some arbitrary way.

Phenomenology accepts much of what American Indian philosophers consider the data of experience. However, it draws a line between what counts as data of experience and what does not at a rather peculiar place for the American Indian. In Western philosophy and science, generally, it is my experiences, my thoughts, and what I can observe that count as evidence or data, and nothing else. But for the American Indian philosopher to make such a break is to invoke a bias toward the individual and individual experience. This is what might be called the Cartesian bias, a bias that surely goes back much farther than Descartes to perhaps the beginnings of Western philosophy itself, but it is Descartes who gives it its clearest shape. Many philosophers think that the great bias of Western philosophy is Cartesian mind/body dualism: the notion that the mind and body are two separate substances. However, from an American Indian perspective, the real Cartesian bias is the idea that knowledge can only be acquired and manifested individually, in or by the individual. The *cogito, ergo sum* tells us, "I think, therefore I am." But Native philosophy tells us, "We are, therefore I am." A Native philosophical understanding must include all experience, not simply my own. If I am to gain a right understanding I must account for all that I see, but also all that you see and

all that has been seen by others – all that has been passed down in stories. What place do I have to tell you that your experiences are invalid because I do not share them? Such a rejection only makes sense under the assumption that my experiences are somehow antecedent to yours and more basic. If it is “We” that is first and not “I,” then what counts as the data of experience is quite different.

In Western thought we might say that my experiences and thoughts count more than your experiences because I have them and you cannot. But if we are *WE*, then this constraint seems rather trivial. The hand may not have the same experiences as the foot, but this hardly matters if we understand them not as feet and hands but as this body. If it is through the body, or the people, that understanding arises, then no one part need shape this understanding. All the experiences of all the parts should be brought into the process of understanding.

American Indians often say that the people are an ear of corn. We may try to just think of each little kernel of corn on the ear, the individuals, but to do so is to take away from what the kernels are: an ear of corn (Cajete 2000). On an earth that suffers each day from environmental catastrophes of tragic proportion, we would do well to learn from this thought. Western thought, philosophy, and science, have gotten us far, we suppose. We have, through technology, become nearly invincible, but we have forgotten how we are related. We desire what is eternal: eternal life, knowledge that is eternal, truth that is eternal. But are our heads not in the clouds? Have we not forgotten what is behind us and at our feet? Have we not followed Coyote and Thales down a very uncertain path toward a rather deep well? This desire for the eternal, the unchanging, through technology and philosophy – eternal life, eternal truth – are surely the desires of Coyote. Life and knowledge are not permanent, American Indian philosophy teaches us. We must continually cultivate them. But just as the ear of corn is cultivated and grows, so does it die. It does not live forever. It provides food for another generation that will carry on and grow and live and die. American Indian philosophy teaches us that to step out of this circle is to make a step on the wrong road for human beings to walk. It is to forget our relations, to forget what our elders have told us, to forget the stories of our ancestors. It is, ultimately, to forget who we are.

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